

STATEMENT OF

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before the

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS, AND  
EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT,  
TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

on

SNOW DISASTERS FOR LOCAL, STATE AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENTS IN  
THE NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION: RESPONSE AND RECOVERY  
PARTNERSHIPS WITH FEMA

March 23, 2010

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Norton, Ranking Member Diaz-Balart, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) role in hazards affecting the operational status of the National Capital Region, as well as our partnerships with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and other Federal, State, and local emergency management entities.

The snowstorms of the winter of 2009-2010 brought unprecedented snowfalls to the National Capital Region (NCR). Our colleagues at the National Weather Service (NWS) advised that snow accumulations in the Washington, DC, area were the highest since weather statistics started recording back in 1883. While record-level snowfalls brought unique challenges to the region, it is important to note that the process for making determinations during weather-related events is not new, but has been finely honed over many years. This decision takes into account the collaborative feedback of a network of stakeholders at the Federal, State, and local levels.

OPM maintains a 24-hour operational center to actively monitor unfolding events, weather or otherwise, which could have adverse effects on Federal Government operations in the NCR. As emergency events arise, OPM participates in conference calls hosted by the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOC) in order to assess events and coordinate communications and response efforts among Federal, State, and local agencies and other stakeholders. Participants in the calls include Federal, State, and local partners in all applicable disciplines, including weather (e.g., National Weather Service), emergency planning (e.g., FEMA, Emergency Management Agencies of DC, MD and VA, as well as County representatives from local jurisdictions), transportation (e.g., WMATA/Metro/Metrobus, VRE, MRAC, Amtrak, commuter bus lines, Department of Transportation for DC, MD, and VA), law enforcement (e.g., Metropolitan Police Department, U.S. Park Police), utility companies (e.g., PEPCO) and school districts. In weather events that occur during the overnight hours, MWCOC calls are typically arranged at 3:30 a.m. with over 100 attendees.

Ultimately, OPM's decision serves to carefully balance the safety and security of the Federal workforce and the public, with the associated costs and lost productivity of a closure. During MWCOC calls, key considerations affecting OPM's determination include the rate of snowfall/ice accumulation and clearance rate; the expected duration of the storm; road conditions on primary, secondary and residential streets; street parking availability; sidewalk clearances; commuter lot accessibility; public transportation capabilities; and status of public utilities. Following the MWCOC call, OPM evaluates the feedback provided, analyzes historical decisions made in similar instances, and makes a final determination based on the totality of circumstances. The final decision is disseminated no later than 4:00 a.m. through simultaneous notifications to media outlets, the Chief Human Capital Officers Council, the White House, and Congress, as well as through updates to the OPM webpage and telephone line. During the latest snowstorms, decisions on closures were routinely announced by 7:00 p.m., the evening before.

On the whole, our initial assessment is that this process worked, and was successful. However, as with any major undertaking, a full review with all of our partners is necessary to analyze lessons learned, and to determine where we can bridge critical gaps. MWCOC will be hosting an After-Action Review on April 5<sup>th</sup> to meet these objectives, and OPM will be an active participant.

Today, as we discuss the recent closure of the Federal government and our liaison with FEMA, I would like to touch on a new partnership OPM has recently embarked upon with FEMA's Office of National Capital Region Coordination (ONCRC). Since the tragic events of September 2001, a variety of efforts have been undertaken to improve the emergency preparedness of our region. Evacuation plans and routes have been re-analyzed and revised, but the success of these plans played out in real-life emergencies remains undetermined in many respects. Testing the viability of cross-jurisdictional plans and educating Federal employees and the general public remains a challenge. To this end, our partnership with FEMA ONCRC seeks to tackle these difficult issues. Our long-term goal is to test our region-wide preparedness through a real-time evacuation of the NCR, like that which occurred during September 11, 2001. Such an effort, however, is no easy feat and requires

tremendous planning and coordination. We have begun this process by developing a Strategic Plan outlining our objectives and working with the FEMA ONCRC's Joint Federal Committee to draw in Federal, State and local partners into the development of a Concept of Operations Plan.

While we work to achieve this worthwhile long-term goal, there are efforts we can make in the meantime to better prepare. Last spring, for example, OPM sponsored a Town Hall meeting with Federal, State, and local emergency management officials to educate Federal employees on the various evacuation routes and plans across the region. We also conducted an emergency management and crime prevention fair. Our last event was in February where together with our FEMA ONCR co-sponsors, OPM hosted a Table-Top exercise for Federal Emergency Managers to test Occupant Emergency Plans and evacuation capabilities and protocols.

Prior to the start of the winter season, OPM conducted a press conference, together with our NWS, MWCOG, and FEMA ONCR partners to outline the Federal decision making process and reaffirm our long-standing commitment to make a status determination no later than 4 a.m. We plan to continue similar efforts in the future, and take very seriously our role in emergency planning. We look forward to any recommendations to improve our efforts.

There is one area that I am confident that we can further enhance and develop in the near future, and that is the greater use of telework. Telework capabilities are a key aspect in ensuring viable Continuity of Operations Programs, as well as the continuance, in an uninterrupted fashion, of important government services and functions. OPM has set a strategic goal to increase the number of eligible Federal employees who telework by 50 percent from fiscal year 2009 to fiscal year 2011.

The closing of Federal offices in the NCR received much attention, but it is important to note that we experienced encouraging news and positive feedback and stories during this historic snowfall. Many Federal employees rose to the challenge and continued to work, making good use of telework and other work flexibilities.

While we are not able to isolate NCR numbers from our routinely collected telework data, anecdotal information suggests that a significant number of employees in the NCR teleworked during the recent closure. Based on information received from our annual call for telework data from 2008, 61 percent of the Federal workforce is eligible to telework, while 5.2 percent of Federal employees regularly telework under a formal agreement. Based on our years of experience working with agencies to institute Federal telework programs, we believe participation rates are much higher in the NCR. We conservatively estimate that 10 percent of NCR employees telework on a regular basis.

We know that telework is valuable for the recruitment and retention of employees. We are aware that it mitigates environmental damage from commuter traffic and lastly we understand that it can help employees balance work and other life responsibilities. However, unless we look at telework as a good business decision incorporating it as an integral part of doing business in the Federal Government, we will continue to ignore the one effective and

important tool that could make the difference between shutting down Federal Government services and continuing to operate with minimal interruption in emergency situations. Telework enables business to continue services and operations without jeopardizing the safety of its employees. As I previously mentioned, this is a major component of deciding to close Government buildings.

I would like to take this opportunity to reaffirm my commitment to advancing telework in the Federal government. To meet my strategic goal of increasing the number of Federal employees who telework Governmentwide, my agency continues to work on the telework initiative that I introduced on Capitol Hill last year. We asked agencies to send their telework policies for us to review. I believe that strong, consistent policies are critical to program success. Of course, we are particularly interested in agency expectations with regard to telework during emergency closures. Most policies require teleworkers to fulfill their duties during closures, but also allow for consideration and latitude with regard to child or elder care issues or other personal responsibilities that may occur due to specific circumstances of the closure. We plan to give individual feedback to agencies that participated in the review, and will provide guidance on how to better incorporate telework as part of their emergency planning.

We are aware that we have many obstacles to overcome in achieving this goal. The results from the 2008 Governmentwide annual call for telework data showed that 49 percent of agencies reported that management resistance remains a major barrier to telework. In addition, 32 percent reported that information technology (IT) security and IT funding are each significant barriers to the use of telework.

With the importance of overcoming these barriers in mind, OPM, in partnership with the General Services Administration and the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office held a Federal Telework Leadership Thought Forum on March 10th. This forum was sponsored by an interagency White House Task Force on Telework of which I chair. This task force is analyzing barriers to the adoption and promotion of telework programs in the Federal sector. The forum had over sixty participants Governmentwide including representatives from labor, and was designed to solicit from the participants, solutions to agency barriers frequently identified in research and practice as well as suggested actions. Results from the forum will be used to guide and model effective telework strategies Governmentwide.

I believe that we can move telework forward to the point where we never again need to close the Federal Government for snow emergencies. By creating a mobile workforce, employees will always be able to work regardless of their location. With proper equipment and appropriate emergency planning, we need only to declare a "mobile work day," and the Federal Government can seamlessly conduct business as usual.

Thank you for holding this important hearing. I would be happy to address any questions that you may have.